

CHAPTER 17:

PERSONAL SAFETY AND SECURITY

**Juvenile Probation Officer and Caseworker
Self-Instructional Manual**

JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICER AND CASEWORKER SELF-INSTRUCTIONAL MANUAL

CHAPTER 17: PERSONAL SAFETY AND SECURITY

Personal Safety and Security Needs

Personal safety is of utmost importance for all juvenile probation officers. Your family, coworkers, community members, and clients depend on you doing everything within your power to stay safe. The following suggestions are those recommended by experienced probation officers. Talk with your supervisor to be sure to know your court's policy and procedure regarding your safety.

Several years ago the Michigan Judicial Institute (MJJI) surveyed courts to identify their security issues. Two hundred and two (202) circuit, district, and probate courts responded. Those courts reported over 1,000 incidents of court related violence and threats of violence during the prior year. The incidents included altercations, destruction of property, disorderly behavior, use of weapons, theft, fires, bomb threats, and in-custody defendant escapes. These incidents do not include the additional disruptions to court operations from medical emergencies occurring within the court facilities, or situations of work-place disruptions involving only court staff. The security incidents reported occurred throughout the state, and were not isolated to any singular geographic location, nor size of jurisdiction.



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Personal Safety and Security Needs *(continued)*

All courts need to regularly assess their security needs. As part of the process of ensuring the safety of all participants in the judicial process, courts and county government must responsibly make philosophical choices. The image of a justice system protecting itself against its own citizens may be troubling to some, and also should be considered in assessing the level of security needed. Funding must also be considered; effective security involves cost. The court and their funding unit must squarely confront these issues to determine the extent to which security will be provided, or the amount of risk that will be accepted. The use of technology, policies, staff, and training directly reflect the deliberate strategic choices made in attempting to maximize safety, while trying to minimize inconvenience to the public and interference with court operations.



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Security Advisory Committee

Your chief judge should create a permanent security advisory committee for the purpose of developing and assisting with the oversight of a comprehensive court security program. The committee should report to the chief judge or his/her designee. The work of the committee's work should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a limited event.

The Michigan Court Administration Reference Guide states: "Judicial administration includes the need to formulate courthouse security guidelines . . ." The goal of an effective court security operation is to establish appropriate protective responses for all persons who are using the building and that are part of the judicial process. To achieve this goal, it is important to have clear written policies and procedures. It is recommended that each jurisdiction prepare or update an overall security procedural manual and instructions.

Daily operational procedures should be included in addition to emergency plans. The plan should be a comprehensive "system", combining separate, but interrelated parts, and coordinate the way in which the parts interact. Once implemented, the plan should be tested, reviewed, and updated on a periodic basis.



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Incident Reporting and Medical Emergencies

Incident Reporting

Your court should develop an incident reporting form, and policies and procedures to be implemented for the mandated uniform reporting and review of all incidents. A policy for reporting all incidents in a uniform matter will ensure that information is collected and that there is documentation which can be used to either validate the effectiveness of, or identify the need for changes in security, or emergency procedures or policies. As part of an emergency procedures manual, a comprehensive procedure for dealing with medical emergencies should be developed.

Medical Emergencies

Given day-to-day risks and the additional stress of coming into an adversarial environment, medical emergencies are likely to occur. Comprehensive plans and training of staff on how to deal with medical emergencies, is the best way to minimize damage in the event of their occurrence.

First aid kits and universal precaution kits should be readily available to staff in each office or on all floors of each building. Kits should be maintained and restocked at least monthly. A person should be designated to check and restock all kits. They should have a list of minimum contents for each kit, a supply of materials to restock kits, and a checklist to verify all kits were individually checked and what contents were replaced.



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Awareness of Your Court's Security Procedures

A new employee should be clearly informed of expectations for individual behavior and performance for any assigned duties relating to security. You should receive training, developed in conjunction with the overall organization security plan for both court and security staff. Training may be done in cooperation with other county agencies.

Communication Equipment

The court should consider purchasing cellular telephones for use by any court staff while in the field, for use in emergency situations or to call for assistance. Juvenile probation officers are sometimes required to work out of the office in situations that may require asking for assistance. The county and courts could provide a pool of cellular phones for staff to check out and use while working in the field. This is a relatively inexpensive way of providing a means of requesting assistance, alerting supervisors to emergency situations, and provides a level of comfort for staff.

Training and Equipment for Juvenile Probation Officers who are Required to Take Probationers into Custody

Juvenile probation officers may be required as part of their duties to work out of the office, checking on probationers at home, school, or work. They are sometimes required to take probationers into custody and transport them to court or to jail. Staff should receive training that will prepare them to accomplish these tasks while ensuring their own security and safety, and the well-being of the probationer.



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Some Practical Hints

First Meeting with the Juvenile and His/Her Parents

Just walking into a courthouse makes most people nervous, anxious, and feeling picked on. Remember that no one ever wants to come to the courthouse. The first meeting is critical to the rest of your relationship with this family and the juvenile.

- When meeting clients for an intake or first meeting, be sure to sit in a chair that is closest to an exit. In case things get hostile, you want to be able to get out of the room.
- Be sure to use all of your best communication skills. Really listen to their answers to your questions.
- Be sure that all of your intake questionnaires include questions such as:
 - “Do you have any dogs at home?” “How many?” Will they be tied up when making home visits?”
 - Do you have any guns in the home?” “Does anyone hunt in the home?”
 - “Has anyone in the home ever been charged with an assaultive offense?”
 - “Does anyone in the home have a PPO?” (Either as petitioner or respondent).
 - “Who else lives in the home?”

The more you know before going into their home, the better. It is also important to get to know your local law enforcement. Call and talk with the local city police department, sheriff’s department, and even the state police. Ask them what they know about this family and their address before you go there.



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Home Visits

If your court requires you to conduct home visits:

- Be sure that your office knows where you are going and when you will be back.
- It is highly recommended that all probation officers go into homes as a team of two. This helps with casework needs and is especially helpful for your safety.
- Get to know the neighborhood. If you haven't been there before, drive around the block to assess *what is going on* and *who is around*. Again, it is critical that your coworkers, office staff, or police officers know where you are and when you will be back. Some offices even have such a policy that their workers will call in just before going into a house and then call back when they have exited.

It is important to remember that a home or neighborhood is not safe simply because you have been there before. Remember that danger can exist anywhere and that you can become a victim at any time. Trust your instincts. If you feel that something is wrong or if it just doesn't feel right, leave the area. You can always call and reschedule for another time. Be observant of the outside of the home. Notice how many cars are in the driveway. Look for gun racks or signs of "Beware of Dog." Mentally prepare an escape route before going in.



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Home Visits *(continued)*

- Be sure to lock your car door.
- When going up to the door, listen before knocking.
- Don't stand directly in front of door in case someone inside wants to get out before you come in.
- Once inside, try to stay close to exits.
- Stay in well lit areas. Avoid spending much time in hallways, bedrooms, bathrooms, or basements.

It is important to remember that we are probation officers **not** police officers. If something feels wrong, your client or their family is uncooperative or hostile, don't ever try to take them into custody or force a situation. Leave the home and call for advice from your supervisor. They may have you call law enforcement.



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Other Safety Tips

- Never document in your car. When you are writing, you are not paying attention to what is going on around you.
- Remember to check your backseat for unwanted passengers.

Anger Signs

- Clenched fists
- A far off stare
- Trembling lip
- Wrinkled forehead
- Elevated voice level
- Change in language usage



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De-Escalating a Situation

If the conversation is getting escalated and you can't calm it down or get out, try some "empathic listening". These would include saying things like you can understand how they would feel angry. Listen to them. Ask what you could do to help. Try to change the course of the conversation. Comment on their personal interests, hunting, fishing, whatever. Try to make it sound like you have things in common with them. Your only goal here is to de-escalate the situation enough so that you can escape.

Be sure to talk with your supervisor about procedures and specialized training you should have to be able to physically get out of an attacking situation. Also, remember to listen to your "gut". If you think a meeting has the potential to get hostile, schedule the meeting at your office and alert other staff of the potential for problems.

Another important thing to remember is not to get into a power struggle with a family. If they don't want to cooperate with what you are asking or refuse, talk with your supervisor about scheduling a review hearing and let the judge make the decision about it. Sometimes just offering this option to a family can bring them into compliance.



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Transporting a Juvenile or Family Member

If you ever need to transport a juvenile, it is strongly recommended that you never transport by yourself. Always transport with another staff member or adult. If the juvenile is a member of the opposite sex, it is best to have the other worker with you of that same sex. (This will help protect you from false allegations regarding any inappropriate behavior). Always have the juvenile in the back passenger seat with their seat belt on. If your vehicle has child safety locks, use them. Be sure that there are no potential weapons in the back seat or on the floor. These might include an ice scraper, jumper cables, etc. Some jurisdictions have policies that probation officers should never transport juveniles to detention. If your court allows it, it is strongly recommended that, again, at least two people transport and handcuffs/restraints are used.

